

COHERENCE IN ENGLISH ESSAYS WRITTEN  
BY NON-NATIVE STUDENTS OF SOCIOLOGY

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this article we will analyse text coherence in English essays written by non-native students (NNS). Coherence is an umbrella term for many aspects of text-connectedness, such as the sequencing of events covered in the text, completeness of the actions or concepts laid out in it and whether the text conforms to what we would expect from a piece of writing belonging to a given genre. Coherence also subsumes cohesion, that is, surface coherence, which in turn includes aspects such as the use of pronouns and other anaphoric devices; repetition, which links different references to entities in the text; synonyms and text equivalents. Our definition of coherence also takes into account those errors which necessitate extra processing time and are, therefore, less coherent, from the reader's point of view.

There is no absolute indicator for coherence; a text may be more or less coherent, that is, it might require more or less processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) from a reader till s/he is satisfied that the text forms a coherent unit. If, even after some great effort at processing a text or part of it, a reader still does not find a way to successfully interpret it, we would be in a position to say the text or a part of it is incoherent.

In order to see what problems NNS have with regard to text coherence, we analysed eighteen papers in English written by non-native students of sociology. Our findings are made up of the analysis of written errors which cause partial or total coherence problems. We consider the presence of errors originating from L1 interference, and how significant they are when it comes to text coherence when compared to others. We hope that this study will be useful when designing ESP programmes that include a writing component.

## 2. METHOD

Our research focuses on eighteen subjects who are second year undergraduates in the Sociology Department at the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*. Given the predominance of English in sociology publications, all those studying towards a degree in Sociology are required to take a two-semester course in English. Although the course covers the four standard skills –reading, writing, listening and speaking– the focus is on the first two, which have been prioritised by the department. As the students' main degree is not English there is no pre-required English level, and their abilities can range from real/false beginners to near native. Consequently, a placement test is given at the beginning of the course which is designed to stream them into two general categories: beginner to lower intermediate, and lower to higher intermediate. There is also an alternative programme for those few students who have near-native levels. The subjects who agreed to participate in our study belong to the lower to higher intermediate group.

Our first step was to evaluate the most common areas in which errors are made when producing a non-fiction text in English, secondly to ascertain to what extent these errors have an effect on local and overall coherence, and finally to look at the devices used by students to ensure surface cohesion. Since L1 interference forms part of our hypothesis we need to be aware of the limitations of a contrastive analysis approach. A contrastive approach looks at the differences between source and target languages, particularly grammar and phonology, and has been used as a basis for predicting L2 production errors. But, as Braidi (1999: 10) observes, while there is apparent evidence of L1 interference resulting in L2 production, errors studies have also revealed that this is not necessarily a one-to-one relationship and that similar errors have been detected among L2 learners from different L1 backgrounds. So, while L1 interference continues to be instructive from a teaching perspective, it is only one of the significant factors influencing L2 production errors. Another theoretical approach to L2 production skills concerns the concept of interlanguage (IL), which has provided us with an alternative source of interference. While the concept of an interim “natural” or “creative” language is far from being well-defined, perhaps the most immediately pertinent aspect of IL theories is the emphasis on the transitional nature of errors. However, in our study, L1 interference still remains a pertinent factor, and one we shall discuss later on.

Errors generally found in texts written by NNS can take many forms, from a simple spelling error –that generally does not interfere with coherence– to L1 interference, grammatical or lexical errors or any

combination, that can render a phrase or sentence partially or completely incoherent. This stage of our research is focused on prioritising errors by incidence, and evaluating how these may result in coherence problems.

### *2.1. Selection of subjects*

Our eighteen-person study group from the lower to higher intermediate category all agreed to participate by sending file format copies of their written essays for use in this study. Analysis of their level test scores reveals a range from borderline subjects (the cut-off between the two categories is an approximate score of 50-52%) to those with a high intermediate level (highest score 85.641%). The level test score distribution for the study group is close to a bell curve with median and mean scores of 69.585 and 70.114, respectively. Therefore the study group does not present level characteristics that would tend to one end of the spectrum over another thus giving a bias towards lower or upper level students within this category.

### *2.2. Task*

This was the students' first written course assignment, that is, they had received no specific course-related language instruction prior to producing these essays. Therefore our findings reflect their written skills at the start of the English for Specific Purposes course.

The assignment was to write a 250- to 300-word critical comparison on the theories of Durkheim (anomie) and Merton (strain theory) as valid explanations for crime and deviance in society. These two theories were used as a discussion topic for this first essay because students were already familiar with these theories from their other degree-related courses, therefore minimising coherence problems originating from the text producer being unfamiliar with the topic they were discussing. Target language input was provided in the form of a text that summarises these two theories, which was then dealt with in class prior to the written assignment and included tasks such as: scanning for the general gist of each paragraph, searching for specific information (differences/similarities between two theories), a review of theme-specific lexicon, and class discussion on the validity of anomie and strain theory.

## 3. FINDINGS

Of all the evaluated written errors categories those related to incorrect verb usage account for the highest (25.81% overall). It should be borne in mind that the discussion nature of the written assignment did not require a

wide range of verb tenses or changes in aspect and so this is not reflected in this study since the use of the present simple predominates throughout. The most common persons of the verb are third person singular and plural, first person singular, and impersonal in that order, and the first observation we can make regarding this category is the number of verb-subject agreement errors. They were all third person singular/plural related and amounted to 51.25% within the category:

Ex. 1. "Every country fight for is goals" or "Durkheim justify the crime as the result of anomie in society".

This particular error was common to all participants regardless of their placement test score. The third person singular of the present indicative seems to be late acquired in the L1 according to Krashen (1982, 1985) and Cook (1996) and this has been put forward as the reason for its late acquisition in the L2.

The next sub-category in order of frequency was an incorrectly constructed verb form (11.25%) such as:

Ex. 2. "... Merton's theory cannot to explain better the problem".

However, many of the errors within this sub-category can be attributable to spelling errors which many subjects immediately identified later without prompting during the subsequent correction phase. For instance:

Ex. 3. "anomie is create by social change".

So, the actual ability to form a verb structure correctly, throughout the group, was not necessarily a significant problem. Generally speaking the use of auxiliary verbs, modals, and passive voice construction did not constitute a problem or cause significant coherence problems when processing the text. Once again it should be borne in mind that few verb tenses and changes in aspect were required for this assignment.

Another area which is almost as statistically relevant entailed two other sub-categories: missing verb subject and syntax (subject-verb-object order-SVO). In the case of a missing subject –10.00% within this category– all but one of the errors were a missing third person singular or plural. This is to be expected given the general discussion orientation of the assignment. An example of this is,

Ex. 4. "I think that crime and deviance are such a complex social phenomenon that they cannot be explained for one factor".

The above example is clearly due to L1 interference given that Spanish and Catalan verb endings mark all persons whilst in English the subject invariably needs to be explicitly present to ensure text cohesion and coherence. However, this kind of error does not render the sentence incoherent, that is, we have to reprocess but we can understand what is being said. As regards verb syntax errors, which came to 8.75% within this category, these were almost equally distributed between cases of placing the subject after the verb in affirmative sentences. Both of these reflect L1 syntax interference from Spanish or Catalan and were common among almost all subjects. Other recorded individual verb-related errors had a minor incidence within this category (missing object or unable to correctly negate a verb structure).

Lexical choice errors were the next most frequent kind (15.16% of total errors). But here we do not include cases such as the following noun-adjective error (this error type is covered later on), as the lexical choice is appropriate.

Ex. 5. "To speak about some deviance behaviours and...".

The degree of incoherence resulting from incorrect lexical choices ranged from more apparent L1 interference originating from false friends, where the reader's knowledge of L1 solves the meaning, example six, to local coherence problems, where the reader's knowledge of L1 is of little help, as in example 7.

Ex. 6. "a genial computer...".

Ex. 7. "This is the anomie and it's more probably that embarrassed people commit crimes...".

Only a small percentage of incorrect lexical choices was registered for linking phrases or sentences (4.26% within this category), however inappropriate or absent punctuation for linking text segments most certainly was, and is discussed later on. The origins of lexical errors are thus divided into L1-related false friends or completely inappropriate choices resulting from L1 interference and poor dictionary use skills.

An almost identical degree of error frequency was attributable to the use of the article (14.84% overall). Despite the frequency with which articles are used in language production in this particular context, this study reveals one

particular problem in this area, when referring non-specifically to uncountable or plural countable nouns (76.10% within the category), where the subjects used the definite article (as is the case in Spanish or Catalan) when it is not needed in English. Examples include:

- Ex. 8. “The anomie is a breakdown or a lack of social and moral norms...”, or  
 Ex. 9. “Merton does not focus his theory upon crime; he explained the deviance”.

This particular error was common to almost the whole group and, given its frequency, often resulted in having to quickly re-process the sentence or phrase to ascertain whether there was a specific referent (in this case a particular or implicit “anomie” or “deviance”) or not. However, this particular L1 interference error is not one that creates serious coherence problems. Other article related errors had a minor incidence rate within this category (definite article missing, incorrect use of indefinite article, lack of number agreement, definite article for indefinite article, and indefinite article when one was not required), descending in that order from 6.52% to 2.17% within this category –see Table 4.

As regards grammatically incorrect word choice, apart from other previously mentioned categories, three subcategories are worth mentioning. Incorrect relative pronoun choice (18.18% within the category), was significant in that it covers a wide range of errors as can be seen in the following examples:

- Ex. 10. “It leads to anomie, what result in higher rates of crime...”.  
 Ex. 11. “... a more realistic explanation about tensions with the individual access to the goals who they want”.  
 Ex. 12. “... shows two different ways to understand which are the causes and the effects of a deviated behaviour”.

Examples ten and twelve are both L1 errors as example ten would be “que” in Spanish and twelve would normally be *cuales*. Example eleven involving *who*, is simply confusion about whether the antecedent is a thing (goals) or a person (the individual). This type of error is also found in native students’ essays. Noun/adjective confusion accounted for 13.64% (example given earlier), whilst adverb/adjective confusion accounted for 11.36%:

- Ex. 13. “if we look clear his *Strain theory*...”, or “... access to socially capacities...”.

The incorrect use of prepositions accounts for 12.90% of total errors where the predominant feature is L1 interference such as in the following examples:

Ex. 14. "By the other hand, Merton's theory tells us that...".

Ex. 15. "Goals depend of it...", or "requiring the same goals to everybody but with different means to reach them".

Once again many of the preposition-related errors did not cause major difficulties when processing the text.

The next significant category was number or gender agreement (9.68% of total errors). As regards number agreement, particular features are: demonstratives, use of the singular with plural nouns (26.67% within the category), and pluralising adjectives (23.33% within the category). Two examples of demonstrative errors are:

Ex. 16. "Although this two theories have some similarities...".

Ex. 17. "We have seen how this two sociologists explain two social problems".

L1 interference in this case may well stem from the subjects' failure to distinguish between *this/these* phonetically as the difference between long  $\text{ɔ//}$  and short  $\text{ʌ}$  is not a feature of their L1. Excepting demonstratives, the other common error in this category was the pluralising of adjectives, a feature of L1, as in:

Ex. 18. "riches holidays...".

Ex. 19. "... with non equals capacities".

Turning to gender agreement, the use of possessives –at 26.67% within the category– turned out to be the most common error:

Ex. 20. "Durkheim, in his book thinks that women do her roles because his brain was smaller than men".

Ex. 21. "On one hand, people who can't achieve goals that society implicitly imposes to standardize us, as a general rule, think only about her immediate necessity".

In these cases L1 interference originates from the grammatical referent of the possessive compounded by the fact that noun gender is a feature of their L1 but not the L2. However, number/gender agreement, although statistically

significant in the errors recorded was not responsible for serious comprehension problems.

We have already indirectly mentioned the significance of punctuation errors earlier, and despite its overall rating –5.48% of total errors– it was another source of minor coherence problems. The incorrect use of commas, accounted for 88.24% errors within this category. The most common comma-related error was fusing independent clauses with a comma when more appropriate solutions would be the use of a semi-colon, adding a conjunction or the use of a relative pronoun. Correct punctuation is not a commonly discussed feature in L2 acquisition but is an important coherence factor in written text production. Allowing for the minor difference in the use of the colon in Spanish and Catalan, standard style manuals for all three languages agree on the use of commas, semi-colons, and full stops. It would therefore be difficult to attribute these errors to L1 interference. At the level of redesigning the ESP programme the coherent use of punctuation had not been a specific focus of the course content. Nevertheless, in the light of these findings has been formally introduced for future programme design.

Finally it should be noted that syntax errors, except verb syntax errors (2.3% overall) and noun/adjective position (0.32% overall), had a minor incidence (1.94% overall). Therefore syntax was generally speaking not a particular problem for the subjects in this lower to upper intermediate scored group.

There are a total of 310 evaluated errors in the eighteen texts reviewed. These have been categorized in the tables below.

TABLE 1. *Overall breakdown of written errors*

1. Verb	80	25.81%
2. Lexical Errors (not noun for an adjective etc.)	47	15.16%
3. Article	46	14.84%
4. Grammatically Incorrect Word Choice (not verb related i.e. subject/object confusions)	44	14.19%
5. Prepositions	40	12.90%
6. Agreement (when not related to subject – verb or use of the article)	30	9.68%
7. Punctuation	17	5.48%
8. Syntax (other than verb structure)	6	1.94%
Total	<b>310</b>	<b>100.00</b>



TABLE 2. *Verbs*

2.1. Subject – Verb agreement (separate from Agreement category)	41	51.25%
2.2. Verb construction not achieved (possibly spelling error not inability to form verb structure)	9	11.25%
2.3. Subject missing	8	10.00%
2.4. Syntax (separate from Syntax category – includes subj.-verb position and adverb position)	7	8.75%
2.5. Incorrect Tense / Aspect	3	3.75%
2.6. Subject doubled (associated with syntax – putting subject. after the verb)	3	3.75%
2.7. Other Imposed L1 structure	2	2.50%
2.8. Active – Passive voice confusion	2	2.50%
2.9. Infinitive vs. Gerund	2	2.50%
2.10. Subject – Object pronoun confusion	1	1.25%
2.11. Object missing	1	1.25%
2.12. Verb negation	1	1.25%
Total	<b>80</b>	<b>100.00</b>

TABLE 3. *Lexical Errors*

3.1. General	45	95.74%
3.2. Lexical items for linking phrases or sentences	2	4.26%
Total	<b>47</b>	<b>100.00</b>

TABLE 4. *Articles*

4.1. Definite article not required	35	76.10%
4.2. Indefinite article missing	3	6.52%
4.3. Incorrect indefinite article used	3	6.52%
4.4. Lack of agreement	3	6.52%
4.5. Definite used for indefinite	1	2.17%
4.6. Indefinite article not required	1	2.17%
Total	<b>46</b>	<b>100.00</b>

TABLE 5. *Grammatically Incorrect Word Choice (not subject / object confusions)*

5.1. No – Not – None	9	20.45%
5.2. Relative Pronoun (misuse or missing)	8	18.18%
5.3. Noun vs. Adjective	6	13.64%
5.4. Adverb vs. Adjective	5	11.36%
5.5. Since – For	4	9.09%
5.6. Some, Someone, Something, etc.	3	6.82%
5.7. Saxon Genitive	3	6.82%
5.8. So – Too – Very	2	4.55%
5.9. Than – As – Like	2	4.55%
5.10. Noun vs. Verb	1	2.27%
5.11. Adverb vs. Noun	1	2.27%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100.00</b>

TABLE 6. *Prepositions*

6.1. Part of verbal construction (no lexical meaning L1 imposed)	17	42.50%
6.2. Other (including missing preposition)	13	32.50%
6.3. Passive voice use of “by”	8	20.00%
6.4. Part of verbal construction (lexical meaning changes L1 imposed)	2	5.00%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100.00</b>

TABLE 7. *Agreement (subject – verb or use of the article)*

<b>7.1. Number</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>66.67%</b>
7.1.1. Demonstratives	8	26.67%
7.1.2. Adjective – Noun	7	23.33%
7.1.3. Other	5	16.67%
<b>7.2. Gender</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>33.33%</b>
7.2.1. Possessives (incorrect possessive or subject pronoun used)	8	26.67%
7.2.2. Reflexive pronoun	2	6.67%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100.00</b>

TABLE 8: *Punctuation*

8.1. Incorrect use of Commas	15	88.24%
8.2. Incorrect use of semi-colons	2	11.76%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>100.00</b>

TABLE 9: *Syntax*

9.1. Adverb	5	83.33%
9.2. Adj. – Noun	1	16.67%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>100.00</b>

From a detailed analysis of the texts we discovered that most of the errors we found could be regarded as “static”, in the same sense as one would use the term when referring to radio reception. In other words, they might distract one but they do not entail extra processing effort. Other errors were rather more serious and required a great deal of processing effort and sometimes needed second or further readings to be able to come to a coherent reading. However, in some cases the search had to be given up as no coherent meaning could be arrived at. There were a total of 28 heavy processing errors classified into four groups: L1 influence, poor command of grammar and vocabulary, spelling/typographical errors, punctuation and unknown. An error was classified as L1 influence when there was clearly a connection between the mistake and the student’s L1 as in:

Ex. 22. “It’s true that social structure and social norms are extremely influence, [omission] even can condition individual psychology, but it has to be remembered the genetic part of human behaviour”.

In English the pronoun *they* has been omitted as the plural third person pronoun *ellos* or *ells* might be. Errors of poor command of grammar and vocabulary were the most common, for example: “Merton presents five forms to confront this restrict access to socially capacities depend if are agree or disagree with the goals and means”. Here the sheer accumulation of minor errors makes comprehension difficult. Spelling/typographical errors: *cientifical*, *maked*, *refered*, *which* are too obvious to need explanation. With regard to errors marked “unknown”, after analysing the texts, we could not come to a satisfactory explanation as to why they had been made, for example:

Ex. 23. “To sum up, social structure influences much more we think in social state we finish get, but goals and issues are the same for everybody”.

The reason for the juxtaposition of the verbs *finish* and *get* might be due to carelessness but it is very difficult, if not impossible to say exactly what caused the problem. In table 10 we can see the number of heavy processing errors per category.

TABLE 10: *Heavy processing errors*

Students	Nº of errors	L1 influence	Poor command of grammar and vocabulary	Spelling/Typographical error	Punctuation	Unknown
18	28	5	14	5	1	3

One of the questions we asked ourselves is if a certain sophistication in anaphoric reference is manifested when writers go beyond simple repetition and/or use of pronouns and whether this correlated with test scores. We found three anaphoric devices that require a certain amount of writing skill, that is, A-nouns (Francis, 1976, 1994; Pennock, 2000, 2001; Álvarez de Mon, 2003), text equivalents and dictionary synonyms. Francis (1976) describes a-nouns as anaphoric expressions consisting of a determiner (*the, this, another*, etc.) and a noun phrase, simple or complex. A-nouns are not mere repetitions of nouns or noun phrases, rather they are semantically more general in nature than synonyms and can refer back to a word, a phrase, or several sentences. Text equivalents are synonymous with other words but only within a particular text and normally refer to some attribute of an entity in a text, such as a person’s profession and they often involve knowledge of the world. Hendricks (1976) calls this phenomenon “stereoscopic”. An example from the corpus is when a student refers to Merton as “the American sociologist”. An example of a dictionary style synonym in our corpus –the only one– is “the cause” when referring back to “the reason”.

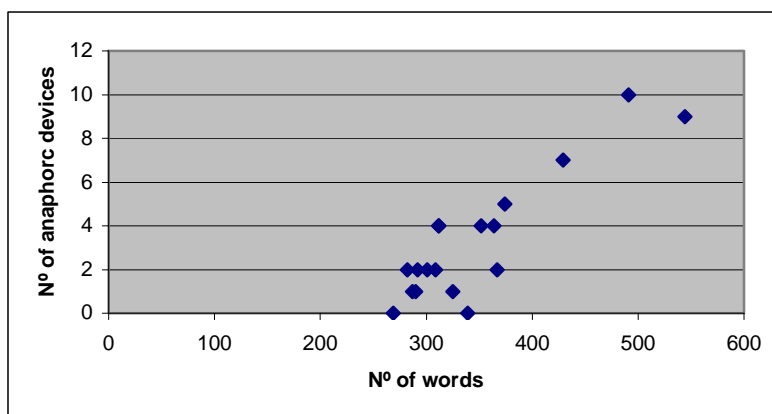
We found no correlation at all between text scores and the number of A-nouns, text equivalents and dictionary-type synonyms. However there did seem to be a certain correlation between density of these anaphoric types and the length of the text. See table 11 and figure 1.

TABLE 11: Anaphoric devices per text

Student	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Anaphora	2	0	0	4	2	2	4	2	4	1	5	4	1	9	10	2	7	1
Total words	282	269	339	352	301	292	312	309	364	287	374	312	290	544	491	367	429	325

We can see clearly from Figure 1 below that, in general, the longer texts have a greater number of anaphoric devices of the types described above. This is not always the case. In Pennock (2000: 95) it was found, albeit for the lexical density of anaphoric devices in general, that there was no correlation between longer texts and an increase in surface anaphoric reference.

FIGURE 1: Density of anaphoric devices per text



We discovered only two or three errors strictly concerning the use of anaphoric reference. Example 24, which we classified as a heavy processing error, creates reading comprehension difficulties because it is hard to ascertain exactly what the anaphors are referring back to. Example 25 includes the incorrect use of *that*, which is too strong for the situation –*it* would have been more appropriate. However, the opposite can be found in several essays, that is, the definite article is used where a demonstrative, a more salient anaphoric device, would be better as in example 26.

Ex. 24. “These theories, like others, are still alive because they talk about society. They wrote these few years ago, for example, Durkheim wrote (...)”.

Ex. 25. “I don’t agree this part of Merton’s theory, because, although sometimes that can be true (for example, people who have anything to eat who stills a piece of fruit), there are also people who being very rich, also commit crimes (like still a lot of money, usually, not to a grandmother but to all the state)”.

Ex. 26. “He created five modes of adapting to strain caused by the restricted access to socially approved goals and means: conformity, innovation, ritualism , retreatism and rebellion. Some of them satisfy the goals and the means, some of them no. It’s important to be clear in the idea: the response or modes of adaptation depend on the individual attitudes facing up to each situation that appears in front of them”.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

With regard to overall coherence, none of the texts under scrutiny are bereft of a discourse topic holding the parts of the text together, nor are anaphoric devices used incorrectly in most cases. The evidence in this study, in which coherence was achieved for the most part, is similar to many others in that it points to the conclusion that both native and non-native writers strive to make their essays coherent. In this respect Hellman (1995: 190) has the following to say:

... bias towards coherence and meaningfulness seems to be a general characteristic of the human cognitive system and we find it at many perhaps all levels of processing.

With reference to the anaphoric reference devices used in surface cohesion, although a text written by a non-native student may be more monotonous or not differentiate clearly between the use of the definite article and the determiners in certain circumstances, the main processing problems for the reader arise from other types of errors. Reference to entities in the text was mostly carried out through repetition of names and terms and also through the use of personal pronouns. There were few examples of other kinds of anaphoric reference such as demonstrative pronouns while A-nouns (Francis, 1986, 1995; Pennock, 2000, 2001), text equivalents and synonyms seemed to depend on the length of the texts –not on the level of the student. Cabrejas (2002: 81) found that more skilled writers, both native and non-native, tend to use more antonyms, hyponyms and meronyms “which suggest that they have a good grasp of vocabulary”. This is interesting as it shows

that, although she found no differences in the cohesive density for skilled and unskilled writers, more elegant use of coherence devices depended to a great extent on vocabulary skills. There were no cases of discourse markers of reformulation such as *or rather, in other words* (del Saz Rubio, 2003). With regard to the use of the more common connectors –although not strictly coherence items as they show “the logico-temporal relations between propositions and other textual relations outside the scope of cohesion proper” (Pennock, 2000: 35)– they were evident in most of the texts, for example, *firstly, in conclusion, on the other hand*. In all, there seemed to be a rather basic ability to refer back to entities in a text, something which should be taken into account when teaching essay writing. Suau & Pennock (1999: 245) remark that lack of sophistication in areas such as the forming of lexical chains is not just found in NNS but also in native students. In fact, some non-native students actually do better than native English speakers:

(...) when observing subjects individually in the three groups, we can say that being a Ns does not presuppose having a better command of rhetorical patterns than a NNs. One can find native subjects with inferior pragmatic competence to that of some non-natives. [our translation]

This is an important point as we must take into account, when looking at the production of non-native writers, that not all of them will have the same writing skills. This should give us pause for thought before concluding that non-native errors are due to differences between the L1 and the L2. Even when we may legitimately state that a difference exists between native and non-native writers, it may be that the differences are not just concerned with straightforward differences in the grammar or lexis of the two languages. Some problems seem to be pragmatically related. For example, although Spanish and English A-nouns are used similarly, Pennock & Suau (1998: 118) found that Spanish non-natives writing in English seemed to be anxious “to mark anaphoric relationships more strongly than they would in their own language”. Similarly, the avoidance of words or phrases which are felt to be too closely identified with the L1, even when said phrases existed in the L2 sometimes cause negative L1 transfer as pointed out by Bou (1998).

With regard to the incidence of the number of errors per essay, it is interesting to note that if these are compared to the actual level of the students, student thirteen, whose overall placement test score was the lowest of all, actually made fewer serious mistakes than some of the others. What is revealing about this is it may turn out that when we mark we might not see the wood for trees, that is, the overall coherence of a text may not suffer due to the proliferation of minor errors, although, of course, several minor errors

in the space of one or two sentences may lead to major comprehension problems. L1 errors seem to be less crucial in text comprehension when compared to a generally poor command of grammar and vocabulary, although it must be stated that differentiating between the two can be problematic. Another important factor to be taken into account is that areas which are not generally given much importance, such as punctuation and spelling may, if poor, be extremely detrimental to text coherence.

An interesting finding is that with regard to the most serious problems, L1 interference is not at the top of the list in table 10. In this sense, differentiation between the errors that we have described as static and more serious errors, which require heavy processing, should be a useful tool in designing courses that address students' needs in a more efficient way given the time constraints that we are all faced with in both the general English and English for Specific Purposes classroom.

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